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## THE TRAGEDY OF NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

THE FLYING PICKETS in Scotland, Wales and Durham set the strike on solid ground, but Yorkshire pickets took the offensive. They weren't prepared to sit and wait for the next NUM executive meeting to order a national ballot. They knew the best chance of a national strike was if most of the coalfield was shut down anyway.

That first Monday morning, 12 March, 250 pickets from Armthorpe, joined by others from two other Doncaster area pits, Rossington and Hatfield, travelled to Harworth, the most northerly Nottinghamshire colliery. Geographically, it was only a few miles from Doncaster to Harworth but politically they were light years apart. In the 1970s, rank-and-file militants from the two areas used to meet. When Arthur Scargill was Yorkshire president he ensured that their paper, the **Yorkshire Miner**, was distributed in Nottinghamshire, but by March 1984 all that had long since broken down.

One Yorkshire striker described the picketing at Harworth: 'There were about 150 of us. We tried to get the morning shift to stop but the officials at the pit encouraged them to go through. For the afternoon shift, we debated with the Harworth officials in front of their men, arguing about pit closures, solidarity and fighting for your job. A lot of the afternoon shift went back. Their officials said they believed what we were saying so we asked them to stand by us.'

But they didn't. Instead they phoned the Nottinghamshire NUM headquarters at Berry Hill in Mansfield to protest. Their news about the picketing caused panic among the officials who were preparing for an Area council meeting. The Yorkshire executive in Barnsley were contacted and they greeted the news in similar fashion.



Frank Cave, the Doncaster Area agent, was despatched to order the pickets home. Dishing out orders didn't work and he was soon begging instead: 'I don't want to take the heat out of this, I want to win this one as much as you do. But the only way we will win is by discipline. What I want to do is to get organised and come back with some discipline in it.'

An older Armthorpe picket described with delight the reaction it provoked: 'The young lads were great. They told him where to go and said they were taking the picketing into their own hands.' Cave went back to Barnsley with his tail between his legs — but the Yorkshire executive then ordered an emergency meeting of Armthorpe miners for Monday evening and sent their vice-president, Sammy Thompson, back to his old pit to speak.

A few days earlier Thompson had been going round urging rank-and-file militants to get organised and active. Now he was desperately trying to rein them in. His position illustrated the classic paradox of the left-wing union official. He had needed the rank-and-file militants' help to ensure that the Yorkshire Area council backed the strike and that it was solid in the Area. But when it came to escalating the strike and winning over the Nottinghamshire miners, Thompson joined the rest of the Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire executives in preferring an arrangement between the officials to the activity of the rank and file.

The pickets were threatening to disrupt an agreement between the two Area executives by which Yorkshire promised to keep the pickets out of Notts until the Area ballot on 16 March. In return the Notts executive would recommend a strike and invite Yorkshire officials to speak at branch meetings.

Three hundred miners in the Armthorpe welfare heard Thompson plead for the pickets to hold off until after the Notts ballot. Outside another 300 miners from Hatfield, Rossington and Edlington waited for Armthorpe's decision. The meeting wasn't impressed by Thompson's call. The young miners in the hall called him a bureaucrat and older militants reminded him of the times when he himself had led unofficial flying pickets in the past, particularly in the 1978 Rescue Brigades strike, when they had been vehemently opposed by Arthur Scargill.

From the floor, one Yorkshire miner explained: 'We can't win with the pits working and we can't expect Ray Chadburn to fight for a strike vote in the ballot. The way we'll stop the pits is the same way as we'll stop the power stations, and that's by mass pickets.' The experi-



ence of picketing two shifts at Harworth had proved both the doubt of Notts president Ray Chadburn's claims that he was campaigning for a strike in Nottinghamshire — and that rank-and-file Yorkshire pickets could win Notts miners with their arguments about pit closures.

After the meeting the Armthorpe pickets and those waiting outside went back to Harworth, and began picketing Bevercoates too.

### The campaign against the pickets

With the Yorkshire leadership denouncing their own flying pickets, it was not surprising that Notts general secretary Henry Richardson should do the same. He even threatened to withdraw invitations for Yorkshire officials to address Nottinghamshire branch meetings if the pickets stayed! He warned that pickets were 'counter-productive' and 'set the men against the strike' in Friday's ballot.

It never dawned on him that rank-and-file Yorkshire miners might make better ambassadors in Nottinghamshire than full-time officials. Certainly if the Nottinghamshire area council had called on its branches to hold canteen meetings where flying pickets could put their case, the outcome of the vote could have been very different.

Instead, the Notts leaders played straight into the Tories' hands by denouncing miners who dared cross the county boundary. The government's strategy for dealing with the miners depended on keeping the union divided. In this way they hoped a strike ballot would fail and that any Area taking action would quickly become isolated.

The success of the first day's flying pickets in Scotland and Wales stunned the Tories and the Coal Board and made nonsense of the press predictions that the strike would collapse before it could get started. So naturally the press and television responded with a savage attack on the pickets — and what better ammunition to use than miners' leaders in one county denouncing men from another? The campaign to split the union now began.

The Fleet Street tabloids painted a picture of a divided union, with 'thugs' on picket lines kicking men down the pit lane. Their reporting was tantamount to incitement to violence against the strikers and against Arthur Scargill. On Tuesday morning, most papers displayed a photograph of a Harworth miner's wife brandishing a toy gun at the pickets. 'Gunning for Scargill' screamed the **Daily Star** headline, while the picture caption read 'She'd like to get Scargill in her sights'.

Malcolm Pithers in **The Guardian** was more accurate than most



in describing Monday night's picket at Harworth: 'Pickets heavily outnumbered police outside the colliery last night and prevented all but a handful of the night shift entering, although there was little sign of physical violence.' In other words, the presence of the mass picket made the Harworth men listen to arguments that their branch officials had never presented before, arguments that persuaded them to turn back from going into work.

On Tuesday the Yorkshire Area council delighted the militants by sanctioning the flying pickets. For Yorkshire president Jack Taylor and the Yorkshire executive it was a desperate attempt to catch up with the rank and file in order to control the situation. For word of the Armthorpe pickets' success at Harworth had spread like wildfire. Small groups from many pits had already sent 'scouting parties' into Nottinghamshire and on Monday night they were saying they would be picketing in the county 'whether the Area sanctioned it or not'.

On Tuesday and Wednesday the flying pickets spread out across the coalfield. Each Yorkshire pit had been given a 'target' in Nottinghamshire or Lancashire to picket and they generally met with success.

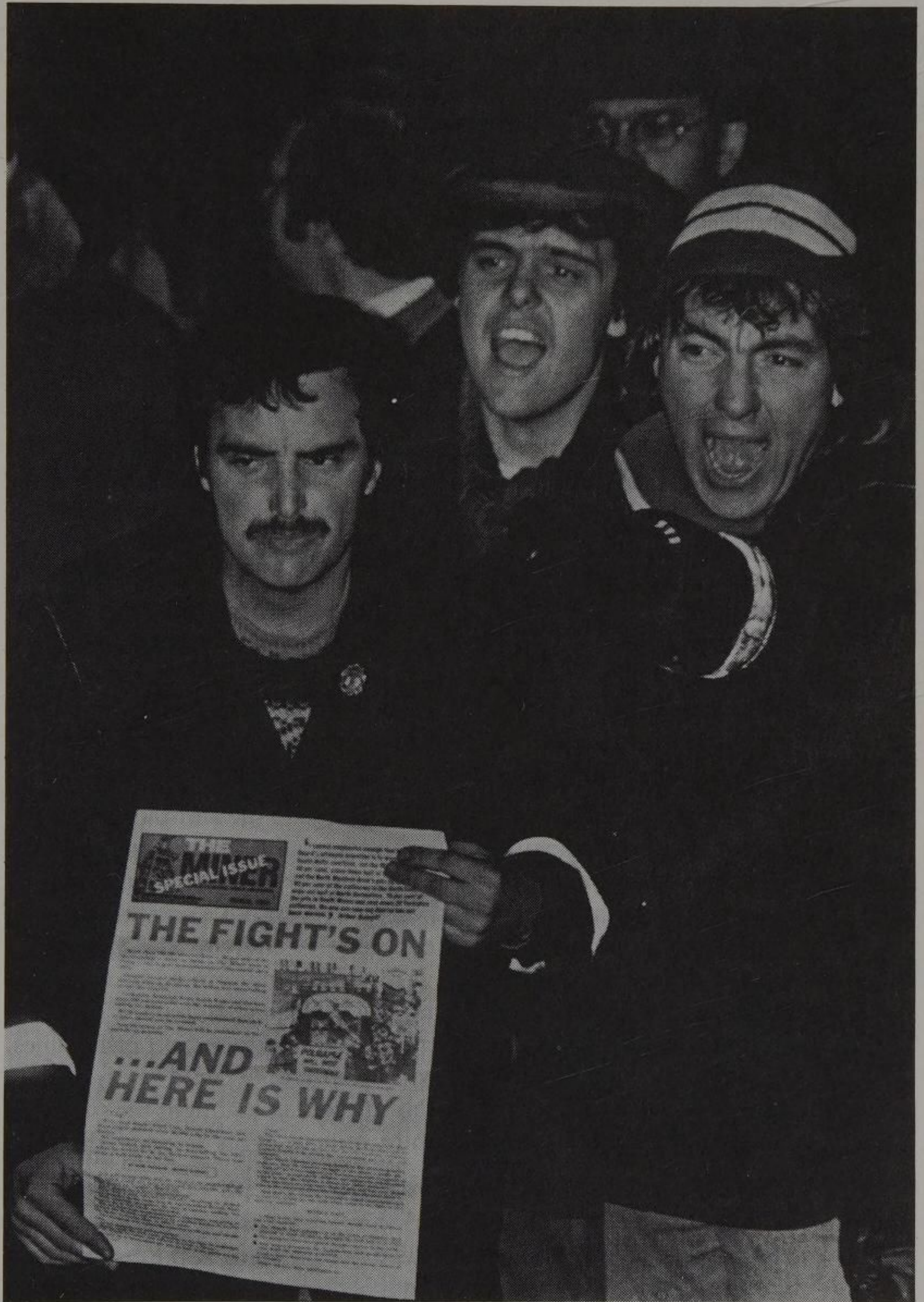
The Doncaster Area pits moved on from Harworth to Bevercoates with none of the violence the press claimed automatically went with flying pickets. One striker described the scene:

The police had a cordon with six pickets allowed into the middle. At that time we were allowed to stop the cars and put the case to them. The only thing that caused any aggro there . . . was only a few shouts of 'scabs' at those who were running across the blinking fields to get in. There was no violence whatsoever against any of those men who wanted to work.

The attitude of the branch officials at Bevercoates was important. They stood *with* the Yorkshire pickets urging their members not to cross. By Tuesday night, only one car crossed the picket line.

At Thoresby 500 Yorkshire miners turned back the Tuesday day shift despite a mass police presence. At Cotgrave colliery, 50 pickets turned back the majority of the Tuesday night shift. There were no police present and no trouble. The Wednesday morning shift turned back too with only deputies and apprentices going in. Two police watched the proceedings. At Hucknall, the pickets met similar success and Silverwood miners picketing Creswell Colliery began a steady campaign which had 80 per cent of the miners turning back by Thursday.





The first Yorkshire pickets at Bevercoates, Nottinghamshire, in March 1984



The Coal Board responded swiftly to the pickets' success. On Tuesday they announced that an injunction was being taken out against the Yorkshire NUM, 'restraining' it from sending pickets to other areas. Meanwhile Ray Chadburn continued his denunciation of the pickets by declaring on television: 'This is not picketing. It's a mass blockade.' He complained about the intimidation of his members and bleated about the need for a ballot.

In the House of Commons, prime minister Margaret Thatcher, bolstered by such comments, told MPs that the 'overwhelming majority of people would support police action in dealing with picket line violence and intimidation.' So would an overwhelming majority of miners, she added. Few could have had in mind the sort of police action she was shortly to unleash.

The Coal Board received their injunction the next day, as flying pickets spread into North Derbyshire and Lancashire as well as Nottinghamshire. Again the Nottinghamshire area council, which was meeting in emergency session, threw trade union principle to the wind. Instead of calling their members out on strike in protest at the use of the Tories' anti-union laws, they instructed their members not to join picket lines — using the court injunction as their excuse!

The Notts pit delegates were supposed to be working for a vote in favour of the strike in the ballot, which was now only two days away, but their main concern seemed to be segregating their members from the Yorkshire pickets.

The national press gave full coverage to the anti-picket hysteria of the Nottinghamshire miners' leaders, the Tories and the Coal Board. But the images they conjured up bore little relation to reality. The **Nottinghamshire Evening Post**, however, did a careful survey of the numbers picketing on Wednesday 14 March. The **Post** has a record as an anti-union paper. It is written and printed by non-trade unionists and throughout the miners' strike it championed the cause of those Nottinghamshire miners who refused to respect picket lines. If the **Post**'s report was in any way inaccurate, it could be expected to exaggerate the numbers of pickets in order to highlight the supposed 'intimidation' of Nottinghamshire miners. This is what the **Post** recorded:

Nearly 600 miners from Yorkshire and Scotland swooped on Nottinghamshire in the first full day's picketing at the coalfield's pits — but there were plenty of policemen on hand to deal with them. A team of **Evening Post** feature writers visited all 25 pits



within an hour yesterday to see just how much pressure was being put on local miners to discourage them from going to work.

Top of the poll at 'high noon' was Ollerton, which has remained the major trouble spot until it was closed down today following the death of a young miner. Police actually outnumbered the 120 pickets by sending in a squad of 150.

Another 90 pickets were outside the gates of Gedling colliery, where there had been no previous trouble, and the 20 policemen had a relatively peaceful time, although local miners were being stopped and the pickets were making a lot of noise.

Only about half a dozen policemen were keeping a watchful eye on the 60 pickets at Calverton with the same number monitoring the situation at Cotgrave where there were 40 or more Yorkshire miners.

Under the headline: 'WHERE THE PICKETS LINED UP' the paper gave the following figures for midday Wednesday:

Gedling — 90, Calverton — 60, Cotgrave — 40, Babbington — 2, Moorgreen — 0, Pye Hill No 1 — 0, Hucknall — 0, Bestwood — 0, Blidworth — 6, Rufford — 6, Mansfield — 30, Clipstone — 0, Sherwood — 0, Welbeck — 5, Bilsthorpe — 40, Thoresby — 20, Ollerton — 120, Bevercoates — 30, Harworth — 12, Linby — 7, Newstead — 45, Annesley — 12, Bentick — 6, Sutton — 22, Silverhill — 13.<sup>1</sup>

And the Coal Board was forced to admit that these small groups of pickets turned back the afternoon shift at nine Nottinghamshire collieries while, at the remainder, some afternoon shifts were 'undermanned'.<sup>2</sup>

The figures given by the **Evening Post** are significant not simply because they give the lie to the Fleet Street descriptions of 'jackbooted pickets', but because they also show just how few Yorkshire miners were actively involved in the flying picketing. The previous day Jack Taylor had explained the Yorkshire Area council's decision to allow flying pickets, saying: 'The gloves are off now . . . We will step up our campaign in the same organised and disciplined way we have conducted the dispute so far.'<sup>3</sup> What he meant was that the officials would ensure they retained control over their members. As the picketing numbers in Nottinghamshire show, this meant that at many Yorkshire pits, the hundreds who put their names down for picketing



at branch meetings the previous week were not contacted or encouraged to take an active part.

Only at Ollerton were events on Wednesday different from those at other pits in the Nottinghamshire coalfield. There, they culminated in the death of David Jones, a Yorkshire picket and the union's first martyr in the 1984 strike.

Throughout that day some 120 Yorkshire pickets stood on the Ollerton pit gates. Both the pickets and the Coal Board understood the significance of the pit. If Bevercoates, Thoresby and Ollerton, the big three profitable pits in the North Nottinghamshire coalfield joined the strike, then traditionally the other pits would follow. The Coal Board had seen the pickets' success at Bevercoates and Thoresby and were determined to prevent the same thing happening at Ollerton.

So too were the police.

Yorkshire miners who went to Ollerton on Wednesday morning expected to picket in the same way as they had done at Harworth, Bevercoates and Thoresby. But they found themselves confronted with police determined to prevent them speaking to the local men. Nevertheless, one miner who picketed all day at Ollerton recalled: 'When the day shift came and saw the pickets were on, instead of going home they stayed at the bottom of the road. By the end, there were only twelve who wanted to work. I was talking to some constables and they were absolutely disgusted that only twelve wanted to work!'

Pickets on the afternoon shift reported that all was quiet after they had spoken to the Ollerton branch officials. Unfortunately though, Jimmy Hood, the branch secretary, asked Ollerton miners to come off the picket lines and not stand with the Yorkshire men — in line with the Notts Area council decision. If local officials had stood with the Yorkshire pickets, the confrontation between police, pickets and Ollerton miners might not have happened and certainly wouldn't have led to the death of David Jones.

No Fleet Street journalist bothered to fully explain events that night, no doubt because it was a Yorkshire picket, not a Nottinghamshire miner who died. If they had done, they would have discovered that the ugly mood in the town that night was the result of the constant press incitement against the pickets, the police attacks on the Yorkshire miners and the indecision of the Ollerton branch officials in telling their members it was 'up to the individual' whether or not to cross the picket line.

Yorkshire miners who had been told that Ollerton wouldn't work the night shift felt cheated by the branch vote that evening to go to



work. The majority of Ollerton men didn't cross the picket lines despite their branch vote, and those that did were untouched by the pickets.

All of this was watched by a crowd gathered at the bottom of the pit lane. The **Nottinghamshire Evening Post**, not the most impartial observer of trade union matters, noted: 'Among the crowd gathered outside the pit gates were many local people. Their mood was mixed. Some supported the pickets, others wanted the pickets to go back to their own coalfield. Local wives shouted support to their husbands as they crossed the picket line.'

The **Post** failed to note that local youths, and some Ollerton miners who wanted to work, began the trouble that night from the pub opposite the pit lane. One Ollerton miner described the scene:

There were women effing and blinding at the Yorkshire pickets to go home. The National Front lads were there with their badges on. Ollerton skinheads were there plus Ollerton blokes wanting to go to work. They started chucking bottles, pint pots, everything. The Yorkshire lads never started any of that you know. It was only that lot coming out of the pub.

Pickets are certain that one of those bricks hit David Jones, a picket from Yorkshire. He collapsed and died as he ran with other Yorkshire miners to protect their cars which sympathetic Ollerton men had told them were being vandalised.

'Davy Jones' death? They're trying to cover it up now,' said a striking Ollerton miner a few days after the tragedy.

Not surprisingly, there were ugly scenes on the Ollerton picket line after word of David Jones' death got around. At 4 a.m. Arthur Scargill appeared to try and defuse the anger.

### **The police move in**

The Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire miners' leaders met in the shadow of David Jones' death on Thursday morning. They quickly agreed a deal whereby the Yorkshire pickets would pull out and Nottinghamshire miners would be called out on strike while they voted in their Area ballot.

When the Nottinghamshire miners' leaders announced the agreement to the press, they didn't take the chance to urge their members to vote for a strike, but denounced the pickets instead. Henry Richardson was asked if the Area strike call meant the flying pickets had won by 'intimidation': 'I suppose in a way they have', he



replied, 'but we are thinking about life and limb. One man has already died, and if this carries on other people are going to be injured. We are saying that for the sake of safety we are pulling our membership out.' It was a shameful reply that helped perpetuate the media myth of what was taking place in the coalfield.

In Westminster the success of the pickets and the fighting at Ollerton caused consternation. The **Financial Times** politely described Margaret Thatcher's reaction:

The prime minister is understood to be angered by the failure of the police to prevent the disturbances. She is believed to have banged the table while making critical remarks about some Chief Constables during a private meeting with some new Tory MPs. She is thought to have said that Chief Constables should learn that their job was to uphold the rule of law, not turn a blind eye to breaches in it.<sup>4</sup>

In parliament, Home Secretary Leon Brittan denounced 'mob rule', and, faced with a 90 per cent shutdown of the British pits, announced that 3,000 police were on hand in Nottinghamshire to deal with further picketing.

It was Friday morning before Fleet Street had its chance to comment on the flying pickets and the death of David Jones. Their editorials nicely coincided with the miners' strike ballot in Nottinghamshire, Lancashire, the Midlands, Derbyshire and Northumberland. **The Sun**, in the best traditions of the yellow press, pinned the blame firmly on the victim: 'Why did he die?' it asked, and answered: 'He was taking part in a mass picket that not only defied the law but aimed to prevent men working by insults, threats and brute force.'

Then, in a shameful sentence that must stick in the throat of anyone who knows the dangers miners face every day in their industry, the paper declared: 'Blood on the coal is a cruel price to pay for political ambition.'

Attorney-General Michael Havers spelled out in the House of Commons the government's interpretation of the law on picketing:

Police have the power to stop their vehicles on the road and turn them away. Anyone not complying would be committing a criminal offence, obstructing the police in the course of their duty.

The traditional right of pickets to stop cars and explain their case was scrapped. The only right pickets now had was to stand near a



workplace — if the police let you through — and wave their arms at those going into work in the hope that someone might stop and come to talk. And even then they risk being charged with obstruction.

Over the weekend, endless streams of police vans poured into Nottinghamshire. Eight thousand police were sent to prevent Yorkshire pickets getting to the Nottinghamshire pits.

As the police went in, the results of the strike vote were announced. In Nottinghamshire 26 per cent of miners had backed a strike, an increase on the 19 per cent in the previous ballot. In Lancashire, the strike vote was lost by 3,765 to 2,596; in the Midlands by about three to one; and in North Derbyshire there was a 16-vote majority against the strike.

The police went to work with a will. Delegates to the Nottinghamshire area council meeting in Mansfield that Sunday found the police had sealed off the road leading to the union's headquarters. NUM officials had to prove their identity before being allowed through. Ray Chadburn complained: 'We have asked the police to leave us alone but they told us it wasn't their decision.' He complained that Nottinghamshire was besieged by police and then typically gave the press a statement opposing the pickets.

The **Yorkshire Post** reported that the Nottinghamshire police were contacting coach operators 'advising' them not to accept bookings from miners going picketing and asking them to report any approaches from the NUM to local police officers! Meanwhile, Kent police blocked the approaches to the Dartford tunnel, east of London, and turned back miners travelling to the Midlands. Miners say they were specifically threatened with arrest if they tried to drive through the tunnel, but the police later claimed that the miners were warned that they 'may' be arrested later for causing a breach of the peace. The roadblocks were in force throughout Sunday 18 March and different police officers gave miners different legal explanations of why they were being stopped.

No doubt lawyers will argue about the technicalities of the case for years to come but the fact was that the police had taken powers no one thought they had, extending the Attorney-General's invitation to turn away pickets' vehicles so that it operated *200 miles* from the pit where that picketing might have occurred. Retrospectively, their actions were upheld by the courts.

In Northumberland, miners from Seafield colliery who'd come down to join picket lines in Ashington found themselves being 'run out of town like the baddies in a cowboy film', according to John





Police seal off Nottinghamshire: a road block near Shirebrook

Neilson, the branch delegate. The whole operation was unprecedented.

The first week of the strike ended with one picket dead, many more injured, the strikers vilified in the press and parliament, their union funds threatened, the largest police operation since the general strike and strike calls defeated in a number of Area ballots. Most commentators were predicting the strike would quickly collapse or that the NUM executive would call a ballot which would go against strike action, despite opinion poll findings to the contrary.

But they reckoned without the miners' sheer determination. Faced with the alternative: fight or surrender to pit closures, the miners stood firm. The more the odds seemed stacked against them, the more determined they became, and their determination was strengthened by the success the pickets found at pits where they *could* talk to other miners.

On Monday morning the police set up road blocks on every road from Yorkshire into Nottinghamshire, but most pickets didn't test them. Instead more than a thousand Yorkshire miners gathered outside their union offices in Barnsley ready to guard them against bailiffs. The Coal Board had brought proceedings against the union



for contempt of court in defying the injunction against picketing. This threatened either a massive fine against the Yorkshire NUM, or even the total sequestration of the Area's assets.

But in a surprise move, the Coal Board solicitors told the high court that they wanted to shelve the case. Tory backwoodsmen ranted and raged in the House of Commons and Walter Goldsmith, the director-general of the Institute of Directors, complained bitterly that it 'weakened the authority of the court to see its orders flagrantly ignored.'

But as the **Financial Times** noted: 'Mr Goldsmith is beating at a closed door: the government, not without qualms and arguments, has accepted the view that to press the order would unify the union which it is in its interests to split.'

The government hoped that the massive police operation, legitimised by the Area votes against striking, and the demands of the right wing on the NUM executive for a national ballot would between them do the job.

The government clung to the fiction that they had nothing to do with the police operation. This didn't kid anyone. **The Economist** reported:

Officially, the police have been keeping the peace on their own initiative. Not in reality. But all government preparations for dealing with the miners' strike have been by word of mouth and informal. The Cabinet Office has taken care to ensure that there are no traceable links with the Coal Board or the police. Even the Prime Minister has been persuaded to restrain her normal eloquence.<sup>5</sup>

The police operation was directed from New Scotland Yard by the National Reporting Centre set up after Saltley. Its aim was made clear by the centre's controller, David Hall, the Chief Constable of Humberside and president of the Association of Chief Police Officers: 'We are determined to ensure that mass picketing is not permitted.' The Home Office was in daily contact with the Reporting Centre.

For the pickets, and even more for the Nottinghamshire miners who supported a strike, the police operation was an exercise in mass intimidation, an attempt to cow them into submission. Despite the police roadblocks some flying pickets did get into Nottinghamshire. At Ollerton five men picketed the day shift on Monday. They were faced by three coach and eight van loads of police!

A few miles down the road at Thoresby it was the same. 'We



were flooded with police. Every corner, every road in. They were lined up from Edwinstowe [the village where most Thoresby men live] to the pit lane, shoulder to shoulder on each side of the road, like they are in London on rallies.'

And a handful of pickets turned back a quarter of the Notts miners!

At pits such as Thoresby, Bevercoates and Blidworth, where the NUM branch officials had supported the pickets, more than half the workforce respected picket lines. At others, such as Ollerton, where the officials sat on the fence, even **The Guardian** reported that just 100 of the 400-strong day shift went into work past the five-man picket.

As the week went on, the police roadblocks grew increasingly efficient. At one militant Yorkshire pit, an average of 28 of the 30 cars sent out never got through. Those that did were appalled at the police behaviour they found. In one notorious incident at Thoresby, police roped Welsh pickets to a steel fence and smashed the windscreen of Maltby NUM delegate Frank Slater's car. The Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire defended his men's action by saying the police hadn't used a crowbar as pickets alleged, but their truncheons! Later police dealt with a further eight cars from Yorkshire in a similar fashion.

Things were so bad that a delegation of six NUM-sponsored Labour MPs travelled to Nottinghamshire to witness the police behaviour. However, former Northern Ireland minister Roy Mason cleared the visit with Home Secretary Leon Brittan first, promising that the MPs would just 'observe', and not join the pickets.

On Thursday, Notts general secretary Henry Richardson turned again and asked his members not to cross picket lines — while at the same time asking Yorkshire miners to recognise the Nottinghamshire men's right to work. Each twist and turn by the Nottinghamshire leadership merely added to the confusion felt by the majority of Notts miners. But it did now look as if Nottinghamshire was going to stand alone: in clear contrast to the action of the Notts officials, branch officials in Lancashire had joined the flying pickets in closing all but one pit; in North Derbyshire the Area leaders had called on their members to join the pickets; and in the Midlands the left-wing officials had called on their members to respect the picket lines — and then joined the Welsh miners at the pit gates.

The police increased the pressure in Nottinghamshire as the strike appeared to be taking root in other Areas. On Monday 26 April



they stopped hundreds of miners in cars on the A1 main road. Not to be thwarted, the miners set off on a seven-mile hike to Ollerton, where they intended to picket. The police allowed them to get within half a mile of their destination before blocking them at Ollerton crossroads. Massively outnumbered, some pickets were arrested and the others were made to wait for hours until transport was arranged to take them back to Yorkshire.

It was straightforward provocation and the next day the pickets struck back. After being turned back at the Nottinghamshire border, they descended on the Coal Board's Doncaster headquarters. After a lively picket they headed for their cars and the motorway, intent on borrowing a tactic successfully used by the French lorry drivers a few months earlier:

'We were making our way down the motorway in a five-mile-an-hour convoy,' a young Frickley miner explained. 'Then the car in front just came to a halt. The driver inside got out and said: "It's snap time." Then everyone got out of their cars for snap time. Cars were stopped all along the motorway for as far as the eye could see!'

But such small victories were rare. Even James Anderton, the god-fearing right-wing Chief Constable of Greater Manchester, complained about police behaviour in the Nottinghamshire mining villages:

'It does appear to the public,' he said, 'that the police have imposed a kind of curfew on the community as a whole, not just on the miners, and also that they have restricted free movement. These features are things we normally only associate with countries behind the iron curtain . . . The police are getting the image of a heavy-handed mob stopping people going about their lawful duties.'<sup>6</sup>

The police had also hit on a new tactic. They began mass arrests, mainly on minor charges such as 'obstructing the highway', then asked the courts to apply strict conditions when granting bail. On 23 March arrested miners were banned from Warwickshire pits until their trial date. A week later, miners were being banned from the Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Staffordshire Areas. And by the first week in April, eight miners from Kent and South Wales were told the whole of Britain except for their own pit village was a no-go area!

The idea behind the bail conditions was to slash the numbers of pickets available to the NUM. They meant that miners could be jailed



for breaking bail conditions if they were arrested again, though their original 'crime' might have warranted a £15 fine at most if they hadn't been striking miners. Four miners from Kiverton Park were arrested on a motorway slip road and jailed for two weeks because they'd broken their bail conditions, which were not to picket any Coal Board property. This novel legal twist, extending Coal Board ownership to cover the motorway network so that the police could get their first miners behind bars, was hardly thought worthy of comment on Fleet Street.

But the pickets had to face not only police harassment but a distinct lack of enthusiasm by some of their own officials. Yorkshire Area president Jack Taylor announced on Tuesday 27 March that the £100,000 strike fund had almost gone. 'The strike has already cost us a lot of money and we are looking very carefully at our financial position,' he said. The Area's assets amounted to nearly £8 million at the beginning of the strike, way above the £100,000 strike fund.

The Yorkshire executive were using their control over the purse strings to maintain a far tighter control than had happened in the 1972 strike. A branch committee member at South Kirkby colliery complained bitterly: 'They're blocking extra pickets by rationing the petrol money for cars. Hundreds of lads who want to go picketing cannot because of the squeeze on finance. We are going to have to do our own fund-raising. In fact we need rank-and-file strike committees at every pit. This is the only way to overcome the feeling of being leaderless!' Unfortunately, throughout the strike there were hardly any elected strike committees in Yorkshire.

### **The campaign for the ballot**

While the pickets and the better branch officials were struggling to unite the whole union behind the strike, the right-wing leaders within the union were pulling in the opposite direction. Their intention was to ensure that the national executive meeting on Thursday 12 April would call a national ballot, which they were convinced would vote against the strike.

The key to their campaign was agitation for a ballot from the Notts miners' leaders. Throughout all the twists and turns made by Ray Chadburn and Henry Richardson, their constant theme was for a national ballot. Richardson believed, genuinely but wrongly, that it was the only way to get the Notts miners out on strike. Chadburn, on



the other hand, was running with the fox and hunting with the hounds.

A secret meeting of right-wing members of the NUM executive was held in the Brant Inn, at Groby outside Leicester, on Tuesday 27 March. The meeting was organised by Roy Ottey, secretary of the union's Power Group, and Sid Vincent, the Lancashire miners' leader. In his book **The Strike — an insider's story**, Roy Ottey described how he was able to get in touch with Ray Chadburn thanks to the help of Ned Smith, the Coal Board's director of industrial relations! Ottey wrote that Chadburn was enthusiastic about the meeting but couldn't leave London. 'He suggested I got in touch with Nottingham Financial Secretary, Roy Lynk, "Tell him I told him to attend and pledge our two votes"'.<sup>7</sup>

The meeting agreed a long statement, which focussed on the call for a national ballot of the union. Only one line talked about the attacks on the miners. There was no mention of pit closures, never mind any recommendation to fight them. Later Tory Energy Secretary Peter Walker congratulated them for holding the meeting.

Sid Vincent rushed back to Lancashire after the meeting and pushed a vote through his executive calling off the week-long strike in the Area. 'I can't hold the members any longer,' he said. But his members had more faith in their union and their strike than he did: two Lancashire pits, Bold and Sutton Manor, voted to continue the strike, and at Parkside colliery, miners voted by a majority of only five to return to work. Picketing by Lancashire and Yorkshire miners prevented his back-sliding having full effect.

In Nottinghamshire, the Area executive agreed to recommend to their Area council that their members should respect picket lines, but only under pressure from Notts miners who were on strike and the decision of the Nottingham train drivers' union branch to black coal trains. Two days later, the Area council overturned the executive recommendation, voting 186 to 72 to continue working and ignore picket lines until the NUM called a national ballot.

The press and television went on endlessly about the need for a ballot. Every journalist and TV reporter asked Arthur Scargill time and time again to call a ballot and to condemn the pickets. To their intense frustration he reminded them repeatedly that the strike was constitutional under the union's Rule 41, and that any decision on a national ballot was in the hands of the executive.

The choice between picketing or a ballot was clear. The Tories, right-wing NUM officials and the press all demanded a ballot. So too



did Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock, who was 'working desperately behind the scenes to secure a national ballot on the miners' strike', reported **The Observer**. 'Mr Kinnock . . . is having considerable difficulty in keeping his party united behind the "neutralist" stance publicly taken by Labour's leadership. That is the reason why Labour has been so anxious to avoid a full-scale debate in the Commons'.<sup>8</sup>

But the sudden liking for ballots on the part of press and politicians was the utmost hypocrisy. Margaret Thatcher, who told Robin Day on **Panorama** of her concern 'for miners who want to vote and are not being allowed to vote', had never balloted the workers at the GCHQ communications centre in Cheltenham a few months earlier when she stripped them of their trade union rights. Nor had Ian MacGregor asked miners to vote on whether their pits should be closed down. Nor had the right wing on the NUM executive been so partial to ballots when the miners voted in a national ballot to reject the Coal Board's incentive scheme in 1977 — they had immediately overruled the miners' vote.

In reality, all those who screamed for ballots and democracy had a cynical 'take it or leave it' attitude. If the result was in their favour, if for example the majority voted down a minority who were ready to fight against the devastation of their jobs and communities, then they would accept the ballot and crow about democracy. If the ballot went against them, they'd ignore it.

The only reason the Tories and the Coal Board pushed so hard for a ballot was that they knew it would help them beat the miners. The miners were divided, between those whose wages, jobs and conditions were directly under attack and those who felt secure for the time being, between strikers and non-strikers, between active strikers on the picket lines and those sitting passively at home. They believed that after a five-month overtime ban and a four-week strike, with money running short in most miners' homes, with the press and TV hammering home the message that the miners were 'thugs' and couldn't win anyway, a ballot might go against a strike.

But despite the massive campaign, the right wing didn't get their ballot. A majority of the NUM executive were mandated to vote for it until a few days before the executive meeting on Thursday 12 April, and the right wing confidently predicted victory. At the meeting itself, Arthur Scargill listened to the reports from the Area representatives and then ruled from the chair that no vote on a ballot should be taken. He proposed that a special delegate conference of the union should be called. The right wing immediately challenged the ruling,



but a vote upholding it was carried by 13 votes to 8. Several executive members who had been mandated to vote for a ballot were saved from breaking their mandate because they were simply able to support the chairman's ruling.

The right wing were routed. The executive then voted 21 to 3 to call the special delegate conference and recommend a change in the NUM's rules to reduce the minimum vote needed to call a strike from 55 per cent to a simple majority.

Those who wanted a ballot screamed about the 'abuse of democracy' but they represented a tiny proportion of the NUM's members. Jack Jones, the Leicestershire president, led the way. He represented fewer than 3,000 miners and had anyway agreed the closure of all the pits in the Leicestershire coalfield! Alongside him stood Ted McKay from North Wales with 1,000 members and Harry Hanlon from Cumberland whose membership was reduced from 600 to 200 in the first month of the strike after a pit closure!

These three together had the same representation on the NUM executive as the Yorkshire Area, though they had less than a tenth of the Yorkshire membership!

The other 'balloteers' were Trevor Bell, who represented the Coal Board's office staff, Sid Vincent, and Roy Lynk — who was to lead the threatened breakaway of the Notts miners from the national union in January 1985. Roy Ottey surpassed himself saying: 'I am determined not to stand by and watch this great union of ours destroyed by civil war.' This devotion and concern for the union surprised some, for since 1972 Ottey had split his workload between the NUM and a seat on the East Midlands Electricity Board. He owed this second job to Nicholas Ridley, the Tory minister who devised the government's plans to break the unions.<sup>9</sup>

The defeat of the call for a ballot was greeted with sheer joy among the thousands of miners lobbying the executive. And it produced yet another about-turn from the Nottinghamshire leaders Ray Chadburn and Henry Richardson. Inside the executive they had begged and pleaded for a ballot. Outside, Chadburn said: 'It's time our members did get off their knees and started to talk about the national union instead of being so parochial. This fight is not about Yorkshire, Scotland, and South Wales only, it's about the preservation of jobs.'

Two days later Henry Richardson spoke at a march in Nottinghamshire to welcome the miners who had marched in protest from Kent after being turned back at the Dartford tunnel by police. He told



the crowd: 'It's about time I talked about principles not what I'm told to say. Five to six thousand are not crossing the picket line . . . I appeal to all Notts miners. I know Ray Chadburn supports me, get off your knees and start fighting.' One Ollerton miner turned away sourly saying: 'If he'd said that four or six weeks ago it would have been no bother. The men were more ready to come out then than now.'

The national executive decision had lifted the constitutional shackles with which Scargill had let himself be bound. After the march he addressed the rally, along with Tony Benn. It was a wild emotional affair. It was scorned and sneered at by the Fleet Street journalists who were bundled out of the hall, but for the Notts miners on strike it was the first time they were gathered together, the first time the leaders of the national union had openly backed them. At long last it seemed their isolation would soon be over.

Scargill hammered home the importance of the strike, called on Notts miners to join it and warned: 'In 1926 our union saw a betrayal from the Labour and trade union movement. The lessons, I hope, have been learnt today.' He also nailed the Nottinghamshire leadership firmly to the mast of the strike, telling the audience: 'You shouldn't underestimate the courageous stand and declaration of Chadburn and Richardson.' But that was a bit much for the miners at the rally.

The Nottinghamshire miners' leaders last hope for a ballot was squashed at the special delegate conference on 19 April 1984. Delegates voted to change the rules so that a simple majority would trigger a strike and threw out calls for a ballot. From now on, every miner not working was officially on strike.

The next day the Nottinghamshire miners' delegate conference finally agreed to make the strike official in Notts too. But it was too late. The damage had been done by a month of vacillation.

### **Driving in the wedge**

The government and the Coal Board had failed in their attempt to use the NUM right wing and their call for a ballot as a way of splitting the union. The great majority of miners were now solidly behind the strike. But they had divided one coalfield — and the Coal Board, police and press now stepped up their efforts to widen this division.

Some Notts miners did join the strike once it was official in their





Arthur Scargill on the picket line at Ollerton

Area, but the majority remained at work. The Coal Board now launched a blatant programme of disinformation, claiming that 87 per cent of the Nottinghamshire miners reported for work after the Easter break. This would have meant a higher percentage of miners attending work than at any time since the nationalisation of the pits in 1947! If it was to be believed, absenteeism had been completely eliminated, the sick and injured had been miraculously cured and returned to work and no one was taking holidays. Even then the figures didn't add up.

The Coal Board also claimed output was 80 per cent of normal. In fact they were drawing thousands of tons from coal stocks each week and claimed this was 'normal' output.

Fleet Street dutifully reported the Coal Board stories as gospel truth. They also eagerly helped the NCB and police manufacture another fiction — the wholesale intimidation of working miners by the minority of strikers and the flying pickets. At the end of April, the Coal Board claimed they weren't running a night shift at most collieries in North Nottinghamshire because the miners were scared to leave their homes at night for fear of attack. The real reason was that so many men were striking that they didn't have the manpower to run



two full shifts, let alone three.

There was a great deal of tension in the Nottinghamshire mining villages. The coalfield was divided between the two-thirds of miners who continued to work and the one-third who backed the strike. There was friction, there were fights and there was intimidation, but the vast bulk of it was directed at the strikers by the scabs and their army of supporters, the police, whose intervention was often totally arbitrary.

By the end of April, one striker from Ollerton had been arrested three times and had his car wrecked by the police. His third arrest came as he was driving down Ollerton High Street one afternoon. A police transit van suddenly pulled up, officers jumped out, and, he told afterwards, 'punched me, dragged me out of the car and tried to throttle me. They thought they'd broken my arm, but luckily it was only a bad sprain.' His son, who was still at school, was also roughed up by police in full view of scores of witnesses!

By the end of April, Notts strikers could move about their villages only if they produced 'picket cards', a pass proving they were employed at a Notts colliery, at police checkpoints. Under this pass law system, their free movement was totally at the discretion of the police. Even miners who were going into work used to complain that they were being stopped three or four times on the way, while pickets warned each other that it was unwise to walk alone for fear of being attacked.

The experience of one striker, on 27 April, was typical of many:

I was walking up to the picket line . . . at Ollerton colliery and I was stopped by three policemen. They asked me where I was going and I said 'Ollerton colliery picket line'. They then asked me if I was an official and I said I was — I carried a card . . . which I gave to [a policeman]. He read it and handed it to the biggest one of the three. After he read it I asked for it back . . . The big one tore it up and threw it on the ground and said: 'That's what we think about pickets'. I said they were nowt but a bunch of sods and they weren't stopping me going to the picket line and turned to cross the road.

I was half way across the road when they grabbed me and two of them held me up against the cricket ground fence and one started hitting me round the body. After they finished I was on my knees, winded and feeling a lot of pain. Whilst the policemen were hitting me about half a dozen men were walking to



Ollerton colliery. I shouted for help but they just kept walking.

This overt violence was backed up by police patrols of the mining villages. Housing estates that before never saw a policeman from one month to the next were now constantly patrolled. Their main purpose, according to strikers, was to detect 'outsiders'. Children were asked if they had strangers in the house, and car number plates were constantly checked. Later the government were forced to admit that cars used by miners' pickets were entered on the police national computer register of 'stolen and suspect' vehicles!<sup>10</sup>

In short, it was open season on strikers in the Notts coalfield. The government, Coal Board and police meanwhile maintained that it was the minority on the picket line who were intimidating the majority



Village policemen . . .



at work and Fleet Street went along with this lie. Only one Fleet Street journalist, John Pilger, did challenge the 'official' version of events in the Notts pit villages. His excellent report on 'the violence you don't see on TV' was printed in the **Daily Mirror** on 29 August 1984 — three and four months after the incidents he described had occurred!

### **Raising the tempo**

The police violence was the backcloth to a renewed campaign by NUM leaders to bring the Notts miners out and by right wingers to keep the Notts Area scabbing.

Arthur Scargill spoke at the Ollerton Miners' Welfare on 27 April, when he declared 'We've got to raise the tempo of the dispute' and called on every single miner to get on the picket line. He promised a national demonstration 'in the centre of the Notts coalfield . . . not for one day, it could be three days'. Then he led a march down to the Ollerton picket line.

But at an Area delegate conference the previous day, right-wing officials had forced through a motion saying there should be no campaigning for the strike by Area officials! The movers of the resolution were of course campaigning and organising against the strike day in and day out.

On May Day they called a mass rally outside the Notts NUM headquarters in Mansfield to protest at a threat by Henry Richardson and Ray Chadburn to discipline officials who openly encouraged their members to cross picket lines. Three thousand striking Notts miners gathered to defend their offices from 7,000 scabs. The Coal Board had given the scabs an unrestricted rest day so they could join the demonstration.

The size of the scab demonstration was a serious blow to the strike. The Notts coalfield was hopelessly divided. This was obvious to rank-and-file militants, who began to question the leaders' tactics and call for mass pickets. In response to rank-and-file pressure, the Yorkshire Area leaders launched a series of big pickets at individual Nottinghamshire pits.

On 2 May, 3,000 pickets were at Harworth. The next day 3,000 picketed Cotgrave. Then a thousand arrived on the gates at Hucknall. The militants were delighted. They had been calling for mass pickets for weeks. The police couldn't intimidate and knock lumps out of the men on mass pickets as they had done when the flying pickets were



spread throughout the country and a few hundred at most stood on a colliery gate.

These mass pickets also provided a meeting ground for young militants from different pits to swap information and discuss the state of the strike. This was vital, given the secret and bureaucratic organisation of much of the strike, and it helped contribute to the pressure on the Area leaders to start the proper picketing of steel.

But these surprise mass pickets were hardly effective. At best they shut down the colliery for a shift, then, once the pickets had gone, work began again. The initial delight the striking Notts miners felt when their pit was chosen for mass picket faded when, next day, they were left isolated again.

The arrival of the 'gypsy pickets' brought with them a new twist in the reporting of the strike. Police estimated the numbers picketing at Harworth on 2 May as 10,000. The **Nottinghamshire Evening Post** raised the figure to 20,000. There had been an increase in the numbers picketing since the NUM special delegate conference but not that number. A realistic figure was 3,000.

The exaggeration was a skillful piece of news management designed to demoralise strikers into believing that mass picketing couldn't work, to sweep aside mounting criticism of the police and to demand reinforcements and a freer hand in dealing with pickets indulging in such 'mass intimidation'.

Throughout the first two weeks of May, the Notts strikers began to organise themselves more effectively. They staged a series of small demonstrations and marches round the pits which encouraged a few more miners to join the strike and they had access to financial help from the Notts Area office for the first time, but everyone in the Area was waiting for the national demonstration Scargill had promised.

When this came it was a march through Mansfield on Monday 14 May. Scargill called for a massive demonstration, not just of miners but of all trade unionists who supported the strike. Its aim was to boost the morale of those Notts miners on strike, to show the police they couldn't turn Nottinghamshire into an island of anti-trade unionism. For many Yorkshire pickets it also held the promise of staying in Nottinghamshire after the rally and joining local picket lines.

The march was a marvellous sight, miners and their families from every coalfield joined by dockers and railway workers and white-collar union banners. At the rally afterwards Arthur Scargill declared to wild applause: 'Thatcher was successful in the Falkland



Islands, but she will lose this battle.'

The day passed off without incident until the police launched a savage attack at the end of the rally, waiting until the majority of demonstrators had dispersed before setting about the remainder. There were 57 arrests and scores of miners injured. Those arrested were charged with 'riot'. The Nottinghamshire Chief Constable Charles McLachlan declared that the riot offence 'carries far greater punishment than the offences we have been charging so far. It's an unlimited fine and unlimited imprisonment.'

### Police on the rampage

The riot charges marked a conscious decision to step up the intimidation of miners actively involved in picketing. **The Guardian** reported on 19 May: 'Cabinet sources confirmed yesterday that the government is hoping that police patrols to stop intimidation in the pit villages will lead to more miners breaking the strike.' Nottinghamshire mining villages were now swamped with police and the week that followed the Mansfield march saw a series of extraordinary attacks on Notts strikers and pickets from other Areas.

The most notorious incident occurred in Blidworth when police laid siege to the homes of striking miners who were putting up pickets from Yorkshire Main colliery near Doncaster. The siege lasted a day and a half with the Nottinghamshire strikers being threatened with a new 'criminal' offence — 'harbouring pickets'! The Yorkshire pickets did leave, but only after an NUM solicitor organised a convoy of cars to take them home. The next day police smashed their way through the locked doors of the Blidworth village hall where the strikers had a soup kitchen, terrorising scores of women and children inside. They left without explanation or arrests.

Nottinghamshire strikers were being arrested for shouting 'scab', for obstructing the highway after police pushed them off the pavement, and even for 'trampling winter barley'!

The police activity did demoralise the Nottinghamshire strikers but it wasn't the only attack on the strikers. Two leading scabs, Colin Clarke from Pye Hill and John Liptrot from Sherwood, took out writs against the Notts NUM to get the strike declared unofficial in the Area — and Notts NUM officials immediately withdrew all financial help to the strikers. Ten days later Justice Megarry granted the injunction.

The judgement, however, was not the turning point of the strike in Nottinghamshire. The Mansfield rally had shown that the NUM





The great march: Mansfield, May 1984



would have to win the strike with the majority of Nottinghamshire miners scabbing. The battle for Nottinghamshire was effectively over by the end of May. Ten thousand Nottinghamshire miners had taken some part in the strike but they'd never been organised into the force that could have closed down the coalfield. Instead, the twists and turns of the Area leadership left them passive and isolated in the first few vital weeks.

In the mind of every miner, the Notts NUM members who remained on strike were the bravest and most determined of all the strikers. They were also a sad testimony to what might have been.

For the Tories, their victory in Nottinghamshire was crucial. The coal mined there enabled them to face up to a long strike. The events in Notts also re-established mass scabbing in the British trade union movement for the first time in decades. And that might eventually prove the Tories' greatest long-term gain.

### **Could it have been different?**

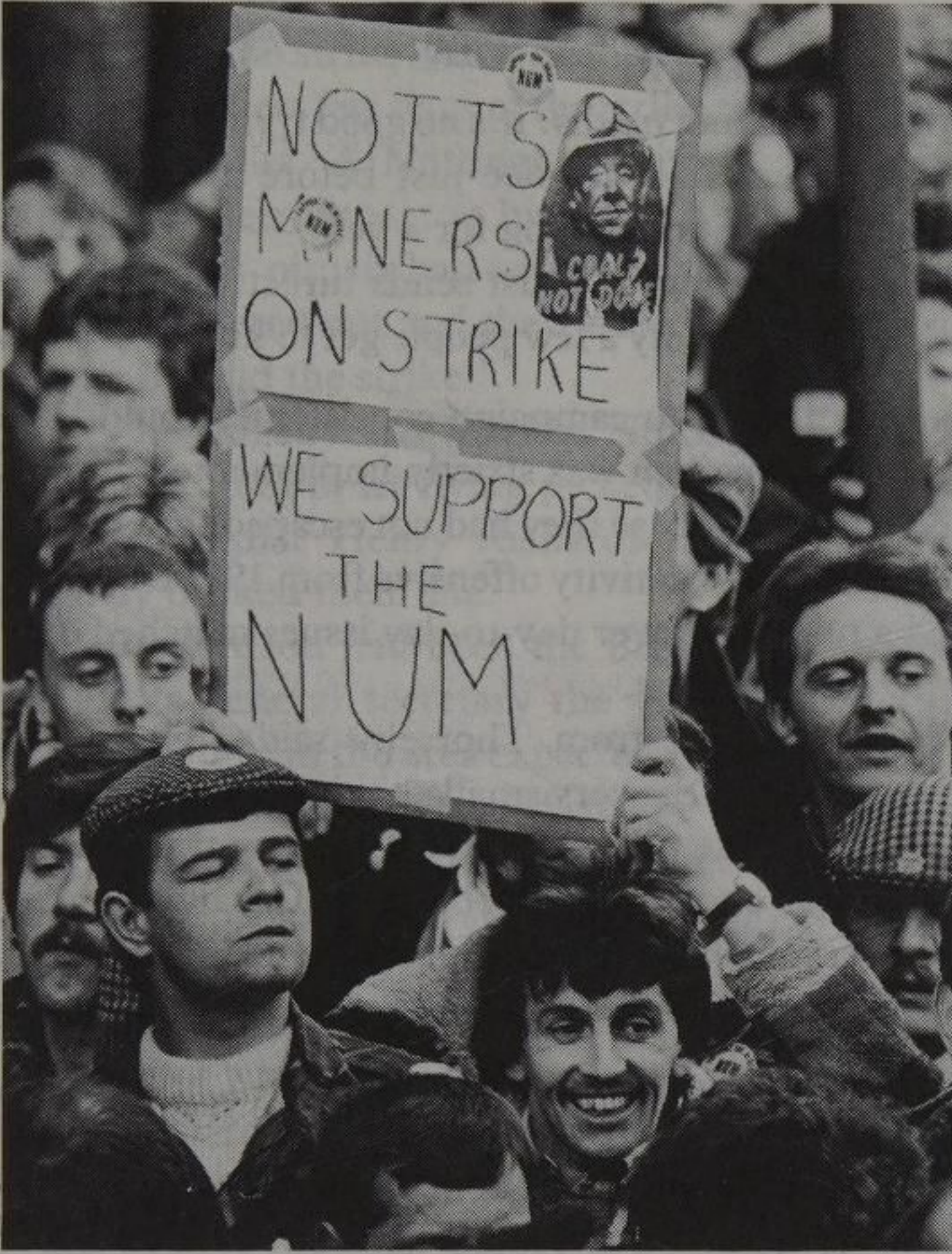
The vast majority of Nottinghamshire miners continued to work throughout the strike. Their scabbing first prolonged the strike, then helped the government to get through the winter without power cuts.

From early on, striking miners tried to explain why the Nottinghamshire men continued to work. A favourite answer was to say that the Nottinghamshire miners had always been scabs — since the days of the 'Spencer union' after the 1926 General Strike. This explanation got a new lease of life when the Notts Area threatened to break away from the National Union of Miners in the winter of 1984. But the ghost of Spencer's union can't be blamed for what happened in Nottinghamshire. It doesn't explain why the Notts miners enthusiastically backed the 1972 and 1974 miners' strikes. In fact it only serves to hide what really happened in Nottinghamshire pits before and during the strike.

After a week of flying picketing, a Yorkshire miner summed up the most important problem they faced in Nottinghamshire. 'I've been appalled by the ignorance we've found. Men quite obviously haven't heard the arguments against pit closures at all.'

Nottinghamshire had escaped the pit closures that ravaged other areas, though many miners had transferred into the area during the pit closure programme of the 1960s. And local miners' leaders knew their Area's immunity would not last much longer. At the beginning of 1984, the Notts NUM produced a major document on pit closures and





the threat to jobs in the North and South Nottinghamshire coalfields. It found that 6,000 jobs in the area were immediately threatened, and that one in three faceworkers' jobs would be lost by 1990 as a result of new technology in the remaining pits.

This document was one of the most comprehensive produced by any Area of the union, yet its findings were never presented to the Area's miners. Henry Richardson, the Area secretary, did claim at the start of the strike that this wasn't so. 'We've had a massive expensive campaign,' he said. 'There have been mass meetings at every pit; Heathfield and Scargill have been round the area and leaflets have been put out. It's been very intensive.' A young activist from a South Nottinghamshire colliery put it differently:

For a long time you get no literature down from the Area telling you what's happening. When it does come, it all comes at once and it's too much to take in. When they put official letters on the union notice board, it's in bureaucratese. Legal talk. You have



to be a solicitor to understand it.

We want plain-speaking truths. It's no good trying to force things into people's minds all at once just before a dispute. Chadburn says he's been campaigning for a year — I've never seen him at a branch meeting. He just sends directives to the branch but that's no good. Only a few people get to know.

Nevertheless, this failure to campaign consistently could have been overcome. The overtime ban was strictly implemented at most Nottinghamshire collieries. Because they had not escaped the crack of the Coal Board whip in the productivity offensive from 1981 onwards, at some pits this fed a militancy over day-to-day issues matched only in the most political Yorkshire pits.

A striking branch official from Thorseby said: 'Thorseby's always been a moderate pit but the very smallest thing, such as a bit of water on the face, could get the men out. And if one face walked out, the others followed. It was one out, everybody out. Usually there's a walkout over water every six months. Last year, we had the pit out, the whole three shifts, for 25p water money for a small team on one face!'

At Cotgrave colliery, a similar militancy prevailed at the start of the overtime ban. One striking miner recalled:

We had a dispute last November [1983]. Sixteen men got £4 short in their bonus. A total of sixty-four quid, and we had five shifts out on strike!

At a meeting the officials said: 'You think you've got a fight on your hands? We've all got a hell of a fight on our hands next year over these pit closures.' The whole hall said 'Yes you're right. We've got to stop the coal now. Don't produce as much, start the overtime ban, cut back on everything. Give them the minimum amount of coal possible.' The overtime ban was doing marvellous. Before the overtime ban production was 26,500 tons a week. We got it down to between 10,000 and 12,000.

There were other signs too. A Calverton miner explained: 'Scargill was down here a fortnight or three weeks before the strike, and was well received. All the people who are scabbing now were standing up at the meeting shouting for more.'

Strikers from other Nottinghamshire pits tell similar if less dramatic stories showing a mood that could have been galvanised into



support for the strike. All it needed was a lead.

In the first few days of the strike the flying pickets gave that lead and got results. A Nottinghamshire miner from Geddling colliery explained their impact at his pit: 'Out of 12 lads from South Wales picketing our pit, six had originally voted against strike action. Their pit was picketed out and they joined the flying pickets. That swayed miners behind the strike.'

The tragedy was that the Nottinghamshire Area officials were determined not to let flying pickets talk to their members. And they made sure that Henry Richardson, the left-wing Area secretary, publicly backed their line.

Richardson had been the Broad Left candidate in the election for Notts general secretary the year before and won comfortably. Every militant in the area expected him to use his position to stand up to the right wing. Instead, the right wing controlled him. From the start, he refused to step outside the rule book for fear it would give the right wing the excuse to start a breakaway Notts union, something he was always worried about.

As the miners' strike loomed, the right wing in Notts wanted an Area ballot which they hoped would give legitimacy to their scabbing calls. Richardson went along with it and the right wingers insisted he join Ray Chadburn as public spokesman for the ballot. Militants in Notts believe the Area ballot was a disaster because it gave legitimacy to the scabbing.

But even then, the Nottinghamshire miners could have been won over — if the Area executive had immediately called on their members to respect picket lines and organised those who did into pickets themselves. The police invasion of the county was itself reason enough to do this.

There was support to be tapped: 'At the start of the dispute we had hundreds of men at each branch out on strike,' said one of the striking Bevercoates officials. 'We had half our workforce out on strike at one time.' At Thorseby, a striking official reported: 'We had about 800 on strike for the first six weeks.' Creswell was shut down for several weeks and most pits had at least several hundred on strike.

But, according to a striking Notts NUM executive member, the executive voted 8 to 5 not to instruct members to respect picket lines. 'Richardson and Chadburn weren't there. They were conveniently absent — I think they were seeing a judge . . .' he said.

Even if the executive weren't prepared to make the sort of call being made by the leaders of other areas, Henry Richardson could



have done so personally and then have appealed to the Area council for backing. The right wing certainly didn't dominate the Area council meetings in the first weeks of the strike. One delegate explained: 'The Notts Area council all backed the union.' Of the branch officials who were to become prominent scab leaders, 'Colin Clarke was on his own up there. He opened his mouth and showed his colours. The others didn't, not in council meetings, though they did at their own pits by going to work.'

In reality the coalfield was split and incredibly volatile, as a branch meeting in Ollerton near the end of March 1984 showed: 'It was the first time,' explained a striker, 'that Jimmy Hood [the Ollerton branch secretary] spoke his mind — when the men wanted a vote of "no-confidence" in Arthur Scargill and the leadership. There was 500 of them [working miners] and about 200 of us [strikers]. They were all shouting against Scargill. Jimmy Hood stood up and when he'd finished, you know how many voted to no confidence Scargill? Five.'

In most Nottinghamshire pits, those working felt they were scabbing but they also thought it would only last a few weeks until a national ballot either brought them out or ended the strike in Yorkshire. With Chadburn and Richardson twisting and turning daily, most were confused and stayed at work. Meanwhile the only consistent line given to those respecting picket lines was that if they turned back, they weren't to join the picket themselves or set up on their own!

This just compounded the disaster that was unfolding. It meant that the majority of the 7,000 Notts miners who did respect picket lines were not organised for the first two weeks of the strike but left sitting at home. Even some branch officials who enthusiastically backed the strike denied their members an active role. If they had organised unofficially from the start and begun picketing their own, then other Nottinghamshire pits, the police would have found their operations in the county much harder.

But with Henry Richardson convinced that only a national ballot would get Nottinghamshire out, and playing his job as Area secretary absolutely by the book, even the best branch officials lacked confidence. One North Nottinghamshire branch official who had the majority of his members out for almost two months explained: 'The Notts Area decision was that we should go to work if no pickets were there.' And his branch endorsed that position.

This led to ludicrous situations when the police sealed off the county and the majority of flying pickets couldn't get through: 'We



were getting maybe 20 or 30 at the bottom of the pit lane picketing. The majority were our own men, unofficial pickets. But if we got *one* from Derbyshire or Yorkshire, that made it an official picket and we all should have turned back.'

If the official picket didn't get through, branch officials went into work even though they were committed to the strike! 'We even had to tell our own lads at the bottom of the lane that they were doing wrong in picketing. Horrible — but that was the decision.'

This state of affairs lasted until the special delegate conference on 19 April. Not surprisingly, men who were turning back at picket lines three or four days a week began to lose heart.

At Calverton, the picture was similar: 'A good percentage of the men wouldn't cross Yorkshire or Derbyshire picket lines. They'd turn back. But when we put our own on, they'd come through. They were making the excuse that the strike was unofficial. The branch secretary used to stand there clapping men as they came through the lines.'

The Coal Board and police certainly knew what was going on and it spurred their efforts to keep the flying pickets out of the county and, if they got through, kick them off the picket line. In one incident at Sherwood colliery police separated Nottinghamshire from Yorkshire pickets and then arrested the Yorkshire men, saying they weren't allowed to picket when local men were doing so. The arrests also made the picket 'unofficial'.

This sort of behaviour led some working miners to join the strike, but without a proper lead it was hard to build on. Furthermore, as the police operation got into full swing and the number of flying pickets getting through diminished, local pickets found it increasingly difficult to talk to working miners. As soon as a picket line was set up it was massively outnumbered by police.

A picket described what it was like: 'They just arrest men for nothing. They don't allow us on the road. We can only wave like penguins with a line of police in front. The police are doing whatever they feel like, everything in their power to make us go to work. If anyone stops to talk, the police are in at the car window telling them to move along or they'll be done for obstruction.'

The story of the early days of the strike in Nottinghamshire is a sorry one, of a tragedy that could have been avoided: if Henry Richardson had given a lead instead of allowing himself to be castrated by the union constitution; if the branch officials and rank-and-file militants who joined the strike had the confidence to organise and act



decisively and independently in the first two weeks of the strike; and if the many branch officials who believed it was wrong to cross picket lines had not taken shelter behind the ballot call.

As it was, every delay and every twist and turn by the Area's leaders merely strengthened the hand of the right wing until the majority of Notts miners grew accustomed to scabbing and the hard scabs began to make the political running in the union.

Of course the blame for the events in Nottinghamshire doesn't just lie within the county. The Yorkshire miners' leaders share the responsibility. Jack Taylor knew from 1 March 1984 that his members would be on strike over Cortonwood. He also knew that no single area could take on the Coal Board alone. He had the time and the resources to send teams of Yorkshire miners into other coalfields to leaflet the pits and explain, face to face, what was going on and ask for support. But he didn't, preferring to discuss solidarity with the Area officials instead.

When the flying pickets did go to Nottinghamshire, the Yorkshire leadership were scarcely enthusiastic. Their obsession with keeping control meant that they didn't mobilise the thousands of miners who wanted to go picketing when they were faced with the massive police mobilisation. And they didn't listen to any of the ideas for beating the blockade suggested by the young militants.

Their failure to mobilise all their troops in the first few weeks of the strike was as much to blame for the tragedy in Nottinghamshire as Henry Richardson's vacillations.

Finally, Arthur Scargill didn't do all he could in those crucial first few weeks. He hammered home the message that picket lines were sacred, he rang leading rank-and-file strikers in Nottinghamshire urging them not to lose heart. He also won blacking pledges from the leaders of the transport unions, which were crucial in giving the strike momentum and creating the appearance of support that must have influenced some miners who were wavering.

But for the first month of the strike he was playing strictly by the book, treating the strike as a collection of Area strikes. Too strictly. He was careful not to appeal directly to the Nottinghamshire miners to join the strike until after the special delegate conference in April. And in those crucial weeks he never backed up his statements on the sanctity of picket lines by joining one. If he had, he might have given the militants in Notts the confidence to organise and start their own mass pickets.



